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ABSTRACT

Communication solely through language has limitations, but translation of one language into another suffers from even more limitations. This paper explores these limitations, discussing the advantages of graphic symbols, the cultural differences which impede translation, the difficulty of expressing emotion verbally, and the difficulty of translating idiom and poetry. The paper concludes that, in translation, the spirit of the message is more important than the word-for-word meaning. (JM)

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THAT WHICH IS LOST IN TRANSLATION

In exploring my topic, "That Which Is Lost in Translation," I have discovered that much of what there is to say about it must come from the individual heart--yours as well as mine--rather than from the experimental laboratory. I suppose I should apologize for that fact, since we have gathered here as a group of educators and scholars hoping to exchange demonstrated truths in the spirit of scientific inquiry. But, I will not apologize, for to do so would be to deny whatever cluster of possible truths I think I have identified in my exploration.

Briefly, I discovered very early that to ask questions about translation is to inquire into the nature of language--its origins, its characteristics, its uses. One is led quickly away from rather simple scientific fact into legend and belief, philosophy and poetry. The ultimate truths one discovers about translation, I am convinced, are the ancient truths of paradox and mystery. They are uttered perhaps more appropriately by oracles than by scientists. Only circumstantially do they deal with differences among languages. Essentially, they deal

CS 003 205

with one of the basic questions of human existence: Do I live my life as a complete individual, perceiving my own unique worlds and thinking my own distinctive thoughts in patterns that can be shared only partially and imperfectly with anyone else? Or, do we live our lives as both products and members of a social and physical environment, a measurable universe defined in certain terms by the collective experience of the human beings who inhabit it?

Now, all this sounds terribly presumptuous on my part. Let me hasten to assure you that I did begin a systematic review of the literature at the onset of my study and that I intended a thoroughly detailed, purely rational, painfully objective, very impersonal argument. But, I gave up both pursuits when they proved less than sufficient to the task at hand.

Instead, I will tell you the source of my title, "That Which Is Lost in Translation." It was at a summer session for graduate students in English in the late 1950s that I first heard the American poet Robert Frost define poetry as "that which is lost in translation." I will tell you the more immediate stimulus for my offering to explore the topic of translation at this particular session of the International Reading Association. First as journal editor, later as director of publications, I have sat somewhere near the center of all those proposals that would have us disseminate the words we speak as an Association in numerous other languages as well as in English. And, I will share with you some observations about how and why language therefore should be taught.

The characteristic problems of translation are not a new topic to me or to humanity. I was first introduced to the general idea of language differences, as I am sure at least some of you were, as a very young child, through repetition in Christian church school of that ancient passage from the Old Testament of the Holy Bible, the story of the Tower of Babel. Whatever your religion, you probably know the tale. The "whole earth was of one language and of one speech." The people decided to build a city and a tower that would reach heaven. The chief architect in heaven itself, however, apparently had grave misgivings, for the Lord noted that with such ambitious plans in their hearts, the people would be restrained from nothing they could imagine to do. Therefore, the Lord confounded the people's language so that they might not understand one another's speech, and "the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth."

Needless to say, we have never recovered.

Those of us who specialize in reading and writing are so caught up in the study of what language is and does that we forget what it is not and what it cannot do. Like those Old Testament descendants of Noah, we sometimes let our aspirations overwhelm our capabilities. Our expectations of language as means of communication probably exceed its capacity to communicate. We might be so proficient at verbalizing that we verbalize beyond reality. Perhaps we need a prophet to point out the confusion of tongues among us and remind us of that which is lost in translation--so much the sadder for all of us, we so easily assume.

Sad? Is it really sad to recognize that language has its limitations as well as its benefits? Look into your own experience.

I was born and raised in a region marked by anything but linguistic purity. First of all, my native language is that hybrid of hybrids, that chameleon of chameleons, English! Anyone who has studied the English language knows you cannot count very long on anything like consistency and stability within the English language. Put two or three words together in English and you probably have come up with a Germanic structure, a Romance vocabulary, and spelling and pronunciation conventions from just about anywhere in the world.

But, there is more to my background. Quirk of fortune that it was for me to have been born into a primarily English language heritage, many of the friends, family and neighbors of my childhood spoke various degrees of that parochial twentieth century phenomenon known as Pennsylvania Dutch. More properly, Pennsylvania Dutch is a diverse collection of mutations of Palatinate German. It survives within a relatively few square miles of the eastern United States from the seventeenth century German of a group of religious dissenters who fled their European origins in the name of freedom, to the glory of God, and in the heat of individual conscience.

To this day there are pronunciations and spellings for a given object that differ in that area from farm to farm. Indeed, in my childhood, while I cannot blame the confusion solely on the Pennsylvania Dutch, you could not be sure if you should call such a common object as a paper bag a bag, a sack, a toot, or a poke. One or the other "misnomer" might even earn you a dirty look, if not a cuff on the ear. Little did I know as a child that when I talked about spritzing the grass, few outside my immediate geographic region

would know that I was talking about watering the lawn. And I was very much into middle age before I learned quite abruptly that one of the innocent and quite onomatopoetic Dutch colloquialisms of my childhood denotes a very obscene function for certain citizens of San Francisco, a continent removed from my childhood.

So, my own experience tells me that we will survive the confusion of languages that looms an impossible barrier among us. Translation, after all, is one of humankind's miracles. While we have not yet accomplished the dream of Babel, to enter and exit the gates of heaven at will, we have been able to enter each other's hearts and minds almost at will. Tolstoy is available in how many different languages, now, and thanks to paperbacks and print technology, he is available to most of us in industrialized nations rather inexpensively. We are able to share approximate re-creations of other times and other worlds and other minds through the commonplace miracle of print translation. How much truer today can be Shakespeare's statement that nothing human is foreign to me. Almost all we need do is choose the right book in the right translation, open it, and read.

Perhaps it is this easy access to translation which prompts me to call our attention for a moment away from the comforting miracle, to remind us that translation is not so easy a process as is our access to it, to point out that much is lost in translation, to ponder, as John Guthrie has called my theme in this address, the withered edges of the flower. In more prosaic terms, there are those things which translate quite well and easily, both between individuals and across languages. There are those things that translate only imperfectly. And, there are those things that do not translate at all. Let me offer some examples of each.

The latter-day pictographs that one sees with increasing frequency as directional signs in air terminals, in subways, on highways are dramatic evidence that we human beings can indeed communicate a considerable body of common experience with a high degree of accuracy and usefulness across languages--some might say by circumventing language in the traditional sense of letters, words and sentences. Men's and ladies' rest rooms, of course, were among the first facilities to be identified not by word, but by graphic symbol. A host of similar graphic symbols have followed in public places, however, very quickly and very effectively. I have read that at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, twenty-six sports activities and one hundred seventy-three other informational or service messages were conveyed by pictograph alone. They included such diverse messages as money exchange, meeting points, bathtubs, locker rooms, customs inspection, interviewing, pet and litter prohibition, lost children, and where to get sponges. I am sure that some of the signs were misinterpreted by some of the people who looked at them, but consider the number of words, the number of hopeless conversations they saved, the number of people who were helped.

Lover of language that I am, I must confess that in driving my automobile, I much prefer graphic symbols to words--except for place names, of course. Tell me that I should not turn left simply by showing me a black or white arrow with a red X across it, or to proceed with caution by showing me a blinking yellow light. Please do not force me at highway speed to decode, interpret and obey an ambiguous sign that says in block letters only, "SLOW TRAFFIC RIGHT TURN LEFT CENTER LANE ONLY."

Certainly some experiences translate well and the ease of such visual communication--which is closely akin to the universal kinesics of the smile, the open hand, the simulated cup at the lips--leads us to yearn for an international alphabet and a universal language. However, what we too often forget is that what is most universal in our collective experience and thus most easily communicated by gestures and signs as well as by utterances, is also most concrete, by and large. Or, it is most abstract and specialized, as are the mathematical symbols recognized worldwide by the relatively few mathematicians among us. Unfortunately, between the basic physical facts that lead us to rest rooms, food stands, lost children and sponges, and the rather esoteric information conveyed by the symbols of theoretical mathematics, lies that vast realm where most of us live and move and have our being, where most of us really care about communicating.

The movement in language evolution from concrete to abstract, but not so far toward abstract as to be generally useless, takes us very quickly into approximations rather than exactitude. That inevitability was brought home to me quite vividly the first time I compared translations of the Lord's Prayer in, respectively, Old English, Middle English, Elizabethan English and twentieth century American. "Forgive us our guilt" turned into trespass, then into debt, and finally into the ultimate concept of today's credit card society, "Forgive us what we owe you." The tangible loaf generalized into daily bread, then abstracted into our daily needs. Where is the eternal truth in such transition of word and concept from tongue to tongue, place to place, century to century within little more than a thousand years? To cite a second example, would the original concept of the Latinate word

expedite be translated into English more faithfully by the contemporary slang phrase kick it off (off or from the foot) than by the more sophisticated and equally Latinate to execute promptly?

Yet, language does seem to serve to pass information from generation to generation, culture to culture. As various semanticists have pointed out, unlike chimpanzees each one of us does not need to touch fire to realize that it burns us if we touch it too long. We can be forewarned through language by "Don't touch!" Yet, who among us has not been burned, nonetheless? Who has not tested the linguistic hypothesis? Maybe we satisfy a basic need to experience first before accepting the language. Much of our scientific attitude and practice, after all, has been developed to check hypotheses that verbal tradition tells us to accept without question: "Kill all snakes." "Tomatoes are poisonous." "The world was made in six days."

So, we have moved inexorably into my second category: What is it that translates only with great imperfection, risk and difficulty?

The many different Eskimo words for snow are cited quite often to illustrate how one's experience affects one's vocabulary. It also demonstrates one of the central problems of translation. While I find the English word influence quite positive in its connotations, Egal Ali, my Somalian colleague, has educated me to the fact that it holds most unfortunate connotations for many in the world whose nations are not among the few so-called superpowers, which sometimes use influence most heavyhandedly. Hap Gilliland told me of an Amazon tribe he met for whom death itself is a taboo. Thus, there is no record possible among them of either population growth or depletion, no sense of ancestor or heir.

Faced with cultural differences of such magnitude and depth, is it any wonder that translation leads to imperfect communication at best? The greater mystery is why we do not completely miscommunicate more often in shifting from language to language. In discussing the mass infusion of Latin word roots into English during the European Renaissance, A. C. Baugh writes, "The very act of translation brings home to the translator the limitations of his medium and tempts him to borrow from other languages the terms whose lack he feels in his own." (p. 259)

Sapir reminds us that language itself, whether or not it undergoes translation, is singularly not adept at expressing the emotions of life. It is very good in communicating the rational, structured, ordered, predictable sides of life. It carries thought well, emotion poorly. Because humor depends on both cultural context and emotional response, much of it tends to translate very poorly. And, I suppose every language has its idiomatic rituals that cannot possibly be translated. The iconoclast in me fights many of those rituals even among fellow speakers of my own native tongue. "How are you?" an American asks, never expecting any answer other than "Fine, thank you," even if you are on your deathbed. A friend of mine, knowing that most Americans automatically couple salt with pepper at the table, used to bark his request: "Pass the salt, please--not the pepper; just the salt!"

I am convinced that Esperanto, Volapük and other attempts at artificial international languages have failed to gain wide acceptance and use for similar reasons. They have been purely rational attempts when much of what we treasure in our own native tongues is idiomatic, even irrational.

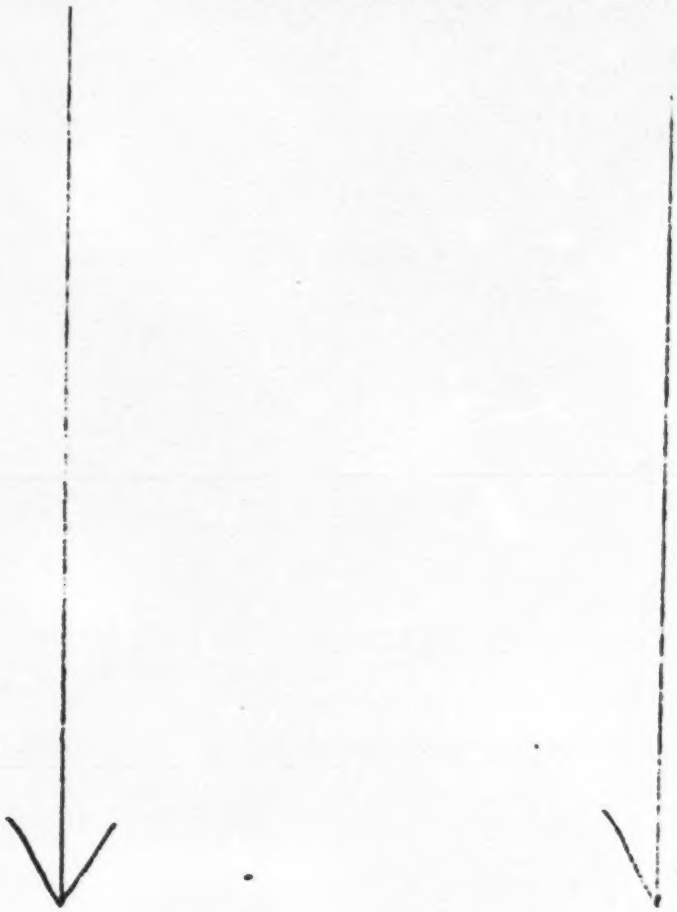
They must be imposed artificially when much of our native expression is contextual, spontaneous and idiosyncratic.

Such thoughts lead me to consider a few of those things that do not translate at all.

The truth of Frost's definition of poetry as "that which is lost in translation" was best demonstrated to me in the reading in class of two separate English translations of the same French poem, "Letter from Mexico," by Tristan Corbière. In my severely limited ability to read French, I caught only the essential facts of the poem: a young soldier had died of a fever and his sergeant was writing to inform his family. From the two English translations, both rendered by English-speaking poets who knew French better than I, I caught all sorts of things unavailable to me in my reading of the French itself: moods, nuances, tones, certain rhythms, pauses, other sound techniques, attitudes, orientation, characterizations--all these I had missed, essentially, in my restricted ability to read the French original.

The episode would probably not have remained with me to this day, however, if I had not learned a more startling lesson during the experience. The two English translations were as obviously different from each other as either of them was from the original French! There is more lost in translation, any translation of just about anything worth translating, we concluded, than is communicated. The best rendering of a message from language to language is not an act of translation so much as it is an admirable attempt at approximate re-creation of another's experience.

That struck me as a rather sad lesson, a stark disillusionment, until I was able to understand that it only reflects from language to language what is also true from person to person, print to mind. As I heard Leland Jacobs say so eloquently, "Reading is bringing meaning to and taking meaning from a page of print." Meaning in language never is solely a one-way phenomenon, just as perfect translation is at last impossible. Even voice patterns have been found to be individually distinctive to the individuals whose lips and tongues and throats have created them--at least as unique to individuals as are fingerprints.



Your reading of something someone else has written is as peculiar to you as the writing was to the writer. What you read is certainly quite different from what that person wrote since neither of you can bring exactly the same meaning to the page in exactly the same voice and mindset.

Does all this mean that we should give up on all translation? Of course not, no more than we should quit talking to each other within our own language groups. We should communicate, however, fully realizing all that is lost in translation, neither expecting more than language can deliver, nor communicating other than humbly and gratefully within our imperfection and fallibility. The drive for translation, for universal communication, is as much a quest after the imperfectible as the various projects of Don Quixote are unattainable. Yet, it is such a quest that makes us and keeps us human.

Teachers, I suspect, rarely get into these human facts of language with their students. The problems of translation, the limitations of language, disturbing little questions of approximation, cultural differences, linguistic relativity, are swamped by one-choice answer keys, absolute misstatements of rule, and narrow exercises. If we really understood and cared about language, we would see it and teach it in its imperfection as well as in its various predictable patterns. The experience would remind us that specialists, for all the highly focussed expertise they can bring to narrowly defined problems, do not, after all, live in a vacuum. We need to hear what they say to us from their artificially confined laboratories, but we will put their findings into more useful perspective if we live broadly and listen carefully.

We need to request translation with our economic eyes wide open, for in this age of cost accounting, money is as much a factor as any idealistic dream of international cooperation. To reproduce a document in a second or a third language--indeed, to produce it in a first language--is to ask how much it will cost to deliver to how many people with what promise of financial recovery. Returning for a moment to schools, how often have we introduced the teaching of second and third languages as a literary or cultural activity, when the decisions about which second or third languages to teach have been motivated fundamentally by economics and politics rather than by culture, with its esthetic connotations of art and literature?

Facing great odds and reservations and limitations, then, why do we who are neither politicians nor merchants persist so strongly in our drive for translation? Is it a fear of loneliness? Do we yearn mostly to speak to and be spoken to by others? Anything but the thought of being alone in an unresponsive universe! Our engineers bounce radio signals from Mars and Jupiter and send them to galaxies unseen, while the odds are astronomical against any living organism waiting out there, capable of understanding the message.

Or, perhaps we are impelled by a vague unspoken suspicion that because we do not speak another's language, someone knows something we don't know, something that might assuage the loneliness or remind us that someone cares, that we are not alone, or, finally, assure us that the other person knows no more than we know.

Perhaps our egos intrude. My language is my own. To speak to me in your own tongue, which is not my own, and expect me to follow what you say is to put my language down, exalt your own, and denigrate me a bit in the process.

Or, perhaps we just reject, at last, the notion that not only translation but language itself is bedevilled by limitations, that all communication serves sooner or later to remind us of what we cannot communicate. Perhaps we believe that if only we become more prolific and adept with translation, we will all of us share some common absolute truth that will once and for all overwhelm the ignorance of the world. Perhaps our trouble is that we dream large dreams, think smaller thoughts, and discover too few words to convey either dreams or thoughts sufficiently to someone else.

What we need to satisfy our soulful yearning to hear and be heard, I believe, is not translation of the word so much as sharing of the spirit in our quest for communication. We need to exchange information, yes, but knowing full well that the spirit of exchange is probably more significant than the information itself. We need to acknowledge our anxieties, if they exist, our fears of loneliness, our suspicions that someone knows something we don't know, our feelings of inferiority and alienation when we are treated as linguistic foreigners. But, we need to acknowledge them in the faith that all of us share similar anxieties, and that such is the human condition, that we are all of us linguistically higher than the apes, certainly, but somewhat lower than the angels in their wordless adoration of eternal truth. We need to acknowledge that common human condition of being always somewhere in-between, recognizing the acknowledgment as more important than the imperfect communication of anything we think we might know or want to know.

A contemporary African poet, G. Adali-Mortty, has said it well in "Belonging":

You may excel
in knowledge of their tongue,
and universal ties may bind you close to them;
but what they say, and how they feel--
the subtler details of their meaning,
thinking, feeling, reaching--
these are closed to you and me for evermore;
as are, indeed, the interleaves of speech
--our speech--which fall on them
no more than were they dead leaves
in dust-dry harmattan,
although, for years, they've lived
and counted all there is to count
in our midst!

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